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**School Violence**  
**Easy solutions that won't work and difficult ones that will**  
James Alan Fox and Jack Levin

The latest episodes of school violence in Santee, California and Williamsport, Pennsylvania have brought back painful memories of the devastation at Columbine High. These tragedies as well as too many other school shootings in communities from Jonesboro, Arkansas to Edinboro, Pennsylvania, have caused parents everywhere to be deeply concerned about their children's safety, and understandably so.

In fact, a national survey conducted by Fight Crime, Invest in Kids in Washington D.C. confirmed what many of us have suspected for parents, it's safety first. Over half of the respondents who volunteered concerns about the back-to-school season cited school safety as their leading worry, well ahead of issues related to academic quality and the availability of educational resources.

Is there anything that can be done to address parents' fears? Plenty can and should be done to stem the tide of school violence. Unfortunately, those policies and practices that seem to be the most attractive to parents and politicians alike are the easy and quick fixes--bad ideas that simply won't work or may even cause more problems than they solve. By contrast, there are several effective and lasting strategies--typically, difficult solutions that may take time, effort, and money to implement, but are the most promising in order to reduce the scourge of schoolyard bloodshed.

*Easy but bad ideas for reducing school violence*

Run public service announcements: In the final year of his administration, President Clinton launched a series of TV ads depicting scared youngsters pleading with their schoolmates to behave, which are designed to encourage kids to talk to their parents about violence. Not only do they add to the massive stockpile of frightening media publicity already given to school violence, but these spots might actually inspire rejected and alienated teenagers to terrorize other students in order to get revenge. They too would just love to make their classmates beg, plead, and cry.

Install metal detectors: Metal detectors are hardly foolproof; there are many other ways in which a student can smuggle weapons past these devices. Besides, a vengeful student can still kill his victims in the school yard (like in Jonesboro, Arkansas) or even on the bus. Even worse, the presence of metal detectors may lull concerned teachers and parents into believing falsely that guns are no longer a problem at school. It may also serve as a challenge for some kids to try to outsmart the system.

Say no to knapsacks: Some schools are banning all but mesh bookbags so that concealed weapons become visible. And one school district in Florida has decided to provide all students with two sets of books, one for school and one for home. What's next--strip searches?

Place more cops in the halls: Communities are spending millions on providing the schools with armed security patrols. Besides the fact that Columbine High School had one, this would make schools seem more like armed camps and would increase levels of fear and anxiety to the point where learning becomes impossible.

Practice duck and cover drills: As part of emergency readiness, some schools have staged Columbine-like simulations in order to prepare administrators and the police should such an unlikely event occur. While these drills may help police SWAT teams gear up for school hostage situations, students should absolutely be left out of these operations. It is one thing to review on paper the steps that students should take in the event of a shooting at school, it is quite another to traumatize them with war games.

Arm the faculty: The National Rifle Association as well as a number of political and civic leaders around the country have proposed concealed weapons laws for teachers and administrators. This would surely backfire. Rather than a deterrent, it could encourage an angry student to shoot it out with the faculty. The same policy might even prompt an irate and frustrated teacher to use a gun, rather than a verbal reprimand, on a belligerent student. Let's not confuse the NEA with the NRA; marksmanship in schools is about A's and B's, not guns and ammo. More generally, teachers should be educating students, not executing them.

Observe telltale warning signs and respond aggressively: There are plenty of warning signs which are, however, only clear after the fact. Hindsight is 20/20. Using one of several publicized lists of red flags would identify hundreds of thousands of would-be shooters, well over 99% of whom wouldn't harm anyone. In fact, targeting these misfits or social outcasts could backfire by further singling them out in a negative way. They would feel, Not only are the students against me, but so are the teachers and the principal.

Maintain zero-tolerance for threats and weapons: Schools across America have instituted zero tolerance policies for threats and weapons. Applied rigidly, this has resulted in the suspension of elementary school children in Georgia for making a list of people they wanted to hurt (including the Spice Girls and Barney, the purple dinosaur); a girl in Colorado who brought the wrong lunch bag to school which contained an apple and a peering knife; and a second grader in Maryland who made a gun out of construction paper. Zero ignorance and a rational level of tolerance make far greater sense in practice.

Blame the parents: Many states have passed parental responsibility laws to threaten and coerce parents into taking a greater role in preventing everything from violence to truancy. This may, however, persuade more parents to distance

themselves further from their difficult youngsters rather than face the possibility--if they fail--of being fined or even spending time behind bars. Although some parents are terribly negligent, most would like to have a greater role in their children's lives. We should assist parents, not assails them.

Require school uniforms: Although there may be a short-term effect (known as the Hawthorne effect), in the long-run school uniforms simply don't work. If kids have the desire to identify their tastes and cliques through apparel, they can always resort to hair styles, tattoos, or other means of distinguishing themselves. Of course, banning black trench coats, as has been proposed, would only force certain kids to choose another form of expression and identification.

### *Difficult but effective strategies for reducing school violence*

Increase after school programs or lengthen the school day. Schools actually are the safest place for our kids to be. With structure and regular supervision, the rate of violence in schools (literally fewer than one homicide per one million schoolchildren) is lower than anywhere else--the playground, the neighborhood, the mall, even the home. The prime time for teenage crime consists of the hours between 2pm and 7pm--after school is out and before working parents get home. The supervision provided by an expanded school day would greatly curtail juvenile violence.

Bring back the frills in school (violins rather than violence): in the wake of various taxpayer revolts, many of the extra-curricular options (band, chorus, drama, various sports, computer clubs, etc.) were eliminated in a return to the basics. This has made school increasingly distasteful and unpleasant for those kids who fail to excel in academics, but could feel good about their achievements in other areas. Ideally, these activities should be integrated better throughout an expanded school day.

Decrease school size (as well as class size): Schools like Columbine High and Santana High, with nearly two thousand students, fail to capture any sense of community. Short of a basketball championship to rally the students, only a tragic shooting seems to bring everyone together. Schools limited to about 500 students are far better in fostering a collective environment.

Increase school staffing and reduce student/staff ratio: If school teachers and guidance counselors are ever going to be effective in identifying and responding to troubled youth, they need a much smaller caseload. Smaller classes and increased staffing would allow school personnel to observe even subtle issues, which cannot be easily determined from a simplistic checklist. More important, our focus should not be on the potentially violent kid, but on the unhappy kid (although at times these may be one in the same), to reach troubled youngsters long before they become troublesome.

Teach conflict resolution skills early on: While many schools have introduced conflict resolution programs at the high school level or even in middle school years, the most effective programs start in elementary school when styles and patterns of peer-interaction are still developing. Recent evidence shows that students who graduate from elementary school programs with these methods integrated in the curriculum are far more successful in middle school. Moreover, the lessons a child learns from conflict resolution programs are often generalized to arguments on the playground after school and to disagreements with siblings at home.

Provide alternative programs for students who are suspended for carrying weapons: Even with the modest decline last year, still thousands of students are suspended or expelled every year for carrying guns and other weapons to school. Unfortunately, less than half of the states have alternative programs for such students clearly the most troublesome and troubled segment of the student population. This means that many dangerous youngsters, prevented from sitting in a classroom, are instead roaming the streets without supervision.

Even with our desire to do something programmatically or legislatively in response to recent schoolyard tragedies, some perspective on the level of risk is sorely needed. In a relative sense, more children are killed or maimed each year in automobile and bicycle accidents while traveling between home and school than are murdered or shot by an armed classmate. Parents concerned about their youngsters' safety would be most advised, therefore, to focus on seat belts and bicycle helmets rather than bullet-proof school uniforms or metal detectors at the school door.

Rampant concern about school safety does, however, provide an opportunity--an opportunity to invest in kids. We may or may not be able to prevent the next Jonesboro or Littleton, but in the process of trying we certainly can enhance the quality of life for all of our young people. The choice is ours: Pay for our children now or pray for the victims later.

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